

PALM NEWS

The major news stories as this issue of PALMS goes to press concern the damage wrought to palm collections by Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria. The areas affected by these storms are prime areas for growing palms in the Caribbean and the continental USA, and many of the public and private gardens in these regions were hard-hit by the storms.

Mercer Botanical Gardens (Humble, TX) does not have a large palm collection, but the entire garden, including its Tropical Garden, where the palms were prominent, was so damaged by Harvey that it is closed until further notice.

In Florida, Hurricane Irma was a strong, slow-moving storm that battered gardens, some of which IPS members visited during the 2014 Biennial. Harry P. Leu Gardens (Orlando), Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden (Miami), Key West Botanical Garden (Key West), Montgomery Botanical Center (Miami), Naples Botanical Garden (Naples), National Tropical Botanical Garden's The Kampong (Coconut Grove), and Pinecrest Gardens (Pinecrest) all report significant damage to collections and tree canopies. Casual observation suggests that palms were often the least damaged directly by strong winds. Leaves were often twisted and torn, but the palms usually survived. Damage to palm collections most often came from falling trees or tree branches. Understory palms that were not buried under debris often suffered sunburn and desiccation in the days after the storm following the loss of the tree canopy. A few palm species seem highly susceptible to wind damage: *Caryota mitis* stems toppled like bowling pins and *Hyphaene* species lost entire branches. Readers may remember the interesting study, published in the pages of this journal by P. Griffith et al. (57: 115-122. 2013), that examined the correlation between the storm resistance of palms and storm frequency in their natural habitat. The authors concluded that palms native to Florida and the Caribbean are more resistant to wind damage than palms from South America.



Hurricane Irma also caused some damage to gardens in the Caribbean, but that damage paled when compared to the havoc wrought by Maria. As humanitarian efforts are rightly focused on saving lives and restoring basic services to the islands, we have only limited information on the palm collections. We have no word from the Dominica Botanical Gardens in the capital of Roseau. Past visitors may remember the large group of *Corypha umbraculifera*, many of which flowered over the years. We are hopeful that the garden survived. Dominica suffered a direct hit by the eye of the storm, so the recovery for the island and its people will be long and difficult. The St. George Village Botanical Garden (St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands) reports extensive damage to its collections, although garden buildings were undamaged. Video posted on-line of the Jardín Botánico of the Universidad de Puerto Rico – Rio Piedras shows catastrophic damage to trees and shrubs. Many palms, however, can be seen in the video, bruised but unbowed. We expect that exotic palms were more likely to be damaged by high winds than palms native to the islands.

Other botanical gardens and the personal palm collections of residents surely experienced some damage from these three storms. We remain hopeful that as the region recovers, so too will the palm collections.